



***Testimony to the Special Commission on Interstate Reciprocity Agreements
September 14, 2016
Presented by Chelsea Sedani, Director of Advocacy***

Good afternoon members of the Special Commission on Interstate Reciprocity Agreements. My name is Chelsea Sedani and I am the Director of Advocacy at Economic Mobility Pathways (formerly known as the Crittenton Women's Union). EMPATH is a non-profit organization in Massachusetts that transforms lives by helping people move out of poverty and providing the tools for other organizations to systematically do the same. We work with 1,300 low income individuals each year to help them create and execute their own successful pathway out of poverty. For many of our participants, post-secondary education and training is essential for securing jobs that will allow them to support their families, particularly in the Massachusetts' labor market. Sadly, many of our participants come to us in deep financial distress caused by an earlier enrollment in a for-profit vocational school. We have worked diligently over the past five years to increase consumer protections for these students.

With an increasing number of students being aggressively recruited by online education programs, we are deeply troubled that the current protections for students that we have fought so hard for could be eroded if the Commonwealth joins the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA). I want to specifically speak on this today and share stories from families.

Sadly, many EMPATH participants have sought our assistance after having negative experiences with for-profit schools (including online programs). Most of these students are single mothers with young children who enrolled in these schools to better their lives and yet most are struggling to pay back their student loans and find jobs in their field of study. Some of them were recruited while living in one of our family homeless shelters and many experienced aggressive recruiting in general.

Sam wrote –

“When you sign-up for these schools they make you believe they have your education and best interest at heart. I however, later found out I was sadly mistaken. The admission process was fast with no real chance to ask a lot of questions. Before you realize what is happening they have you signed up and you really don’t know what is right or wrong. I also trusted what they said and thought I was going to get a good education. For some reason I had to make monthly payments directly to the school in addition to my loans. This was before I even finished my program. Looking back now, I don’t think I should have had to do that and I feel like I was tricked by the school.”

DJ said –

“The for-profit school I attended didn’t fulfill their promise to me of support and helping me find a job following graduation and giving me the proper education needed to be appeal to employers. This was not fair to me or my son. The school I attended has since changed names. I feel that I was taken advantage of by the school and have nothing to show for all my efforts aside from massive amount of debt.”

Marisol wrote –

“...one day, I received a call from an online school in another state. I had never requested information from them. I told them that I did not know what they were talking about and that I was not interested.”

Marisol continued –

“But they kept calling me anyway. The caller convinced me to sign up. He said that with the flexibility of going to school from home and the convenience of logging in at any time that I could manage the time. He also told me that it was not a problem that I didn’t know if I wanted to study early childhood education or business management for healthcare, because I could just start in early education then easily change majors and that it wouldn’t be a problem. I expressed my concern with financing and told him I did not want debt. I asked if there were any scholarships available and he assured me that I would have a financial advisor who would help me find scholarships and grants for tuition.

The caller even sent me enrollment papers to sign and kept repeatedly calling until I returned them. He said everything to convince me that my concerns would be addressed if I enrolled and that this would be the perfect opportunity to begin my journey to a better future for my family. I would have never enrolled if it weren't for the assurances the caller gave me."

Marisol concluded –

"This online school ended up hindering my ability to move forward. The school left me discouraged, without the degree I wanted or any degree at all, and with a pile of student loan debt dragging me down as I tried to provide for my family...These on-line schools are like wolves taking advantage of single mothers and anyone looking to better their future. In my experience, the school was more focused on getting me enrolled in the school and getting money then providing me with the education I needed and deserved. It failed to deliver on any of its promises. Too many people are obtaining debt instead of a degree/certificate from these schools."

At EMPath, we have seen close to 200 students come through our doors over the past few years with student loan debt and similar stories (and these are just the families who have been referred to us). We know there are more. Students currently do not have much recourse if they feel they have been wronged by a school. They are stuck with the debt and dead end certificates/degrees.

These stories illustrate the importance of the new MA school regulations which prohibit schools from calling potential students more than twice a week, prohibit schools from making misleading statements about financial aid to potential students, and prohibit schools from making misleading statements to potential recruits more generally. If MA signs onto the current SARA, it wouldn't be able to enforce those regulations against out-of-state schools like the one Marisol attended -- and would be abandoning protection of students like Marisol, DJ and Sam. We are deeply troubled by the idea of low-income students losing these necessary protections and encourage you to recommend that Massachusetts not sign onto SARA. Thank you.